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The female voice in Pasifika poetry: An exploration of “hybrid” identities in the Pacific diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Histories of colonialism and migration have led to a wide variety of cultural identities in the Pacific diaspora. *Afakasi* in Samoan, *hafekasi* in Tongan, *hapa* in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i are all used to describe “half-caste” Pacific Islander identities of mixed heritage. This article analyses themes of hybrid diasporic identity in poems by Karlo Mila, Grace Teuila Taylor, Selina Tusitala Marsh and the late Teresia K. Teaiwa. Special focus is put on issues of “finding oneself” and the struggles of reconciling “traditional” and modern-day female roles. The following perspectives inform this exploration: hybrid Pasifika identities constitute themselves in culturally specific differences, yet are connected in their pan-Pacific similarities; poetry is used to express these identities and social roles in the Pacific diaspora, particularly regarding academia and motherhood; and a cultural tradition of orality and storytelling emphasizes the significance of turning writing into spoken performance.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora; hybridity; identities; migration; Pasifika; spoken word

Pasifika in diaspora

Afakasi in Samoan, *hafekasi* in Tongan, *hapa* in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, *hapkas* in Tok Pisin and *kai loma* in Fijian are all used to describe a “half-caste” identity of mixed Pacific Islander heritage. Although the colonial terminology alluding to mixed blood, and thus blood quantum as a racial determinant, is outdated and contentious, self-described *afakasi* poets like Grace Teuila Taylor and Selina Tusitala Marsh have reclaimed the term in their writing. Marsh’s poems “*afa kasi*” (2003) and “*Afakasi is*” (2006) and Taylor’s (2013) collection titled *Afakasi Speaks* exemplify this exercise. Not only does the term encompass their reckoning with a sense of liminality or an in-betweenness of being multi-ethnic and multicultural on account of heritage, it also describes the particularities of diasporic identities that further play into a sense of hybridity (Hall [1992] 2003). This article analyses the themes of a hybrid diasporic identity in poems by Selina Tusitala Marsh, Grace Teuila Taylor, Karlo Mila and the late Teresia K. Teaiwa. Special focus is put on issues of “finding oneself” and the struggles of reconciling “traditional” and modern-day female roles, in particular the expectations of motherhood and academia.

The literature analysed here may appear to take on a partial perspective emanating from the urban Pasifika diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the pan-Pacific term

“Pasifika” originated from the Samoan transliteration of the word Pacific.¹ However, this is more reflective of the number of publications originating from this nation rather than a geographic predisposition to the themes to be discussed. In Pacific-related research, the name was conceptualized as a more islander-centric, self-defined and self-determined term that acknowledges the heterogeneity of this diverse demographic specifically located within Aotearoa New Zealand (Marsh 2010, 198). In contrast to this, the poetry of Teresia K. Teaiwa reveals not only the particularities of being of Pacific Islander and African American descent, but also a distinct notion of Pasifika from within the US context in Hawai‘i, California and Washington, DC.

In addition to analysing written poetry, I also incorporate the effects of the authors’ video and audio footage of oral performances. Access to the Internet enables this medium to bring oral and written literature full circle as a form of cultural storytelling, allowing for a wider and more global audience that is suitable to the Pacific diaspora. Acknowledging the colonial linguistic divide between anglophone and francophone Pacific literatures and the importance of reconnecting these across the Pacific in their common themes of postcolonial identities, I briefly examine the writing in French of Tahitian Chantal T. Spitz, who is based in French Polynesia.

Fast talking afakasi – Selina Tusitala Marsh

Selina Tusitala Marsh is of Samoan, Tuvaluan, Scottish and French descent and was the first Pacific Islander to graduate with a PhD from the University of Auckland. She also has the distinction of being the first Pacific writer whose work was commissioned by and performed for the British head of state, Queen Elizabeth II.² Marsh’s ([2003] 2003) short poem “afa kasi”, published in the collection *Whetu Moana*, strikes a desolate mood: being “half caste / cast in half” means no closure because “neither / is either full” (133). The poem ends on a dark note with the lines “cast / and died / as different” conveying an irreconcilable difference through imagery of death and damage. In contrast to this, Marsh’s later poem “Afakasi is” utilizes the metaphor of a butterfly’s chrysalis, employing imagery of partiality and incompleteness with mention of an “eclipse”, but also balance through the symbolism “yin [and] yang” and the shifting “chameleon” (2006). While she refers to insecurities, she concludes the poem with “monarch is / matriarch”, suggesting a new-found power in the authority of women when embracing this identity.

Marsh’s acclaimed poem “Fast Talking PI” (2009a) is, according to the author, a “noun-driven list-poem (where nouns also morph into adjectives) [which] presents signs in the form of identity markers” (Marsh 2010, 204). She elaborates on links within the Pasifika community so that “the wholly self-realized ‘I am’ is also the representative ‘I’ of the wider Pasifika community”, and calls it “the ‘I’ of the *afakasi* [...] diasporic Pasifika community” (2010, 204). Marsh explains how her first stanza refers to the quantitative data on Pacific Islanders, such as low academic achievement, serious health problems and over-representation in the criminal justice system, while the second stanza counters these statistics. Marsh describes the poem’s tone and character with its all-encompassing affirmations as a declaration, wherein “concrete realities are raised, confirmed and celebrated, problematised and complicated” (2010, 204). Addressing afakasi identity in the poem, Marsh again uses the imagery of the chameleon, but

also the mongrel in the triplet “I’m a bit of both PI / a chameleon PI / a hybrid, mongrelized self-satisfied PI” (2009a, 61). She describes her poem as a response to negative stereotypes of Pacific Islanders, explaining: “That poem came from me [...] seeing a *New Zealand Herald* headline, saying something like: ‘PI New Zealand’s brown underclass draining the economy dry’” (Marsh 2017). She said this “was yet another way the media let on board these negative stereotypes about my people” (2017). Marsh felt the need to oppose such categorizations and her poem has had great resonance, especially in schools, where she encourages the students to extend it with their own stanzas.

Pasifika poets often pay homage to their contemporaries, by referencing their works or accomplishments or by writing about them as Marsh does in “Fast Talking PI”. Among the female Pacific Islander women writer-scholars that Marsh pays homage to in this poem are Teresia K. Teaiwa (“I’m Searching for Nei Nim’anoa”, 1995), Karlo Mila (“I’m a Dream Fish Floating”, 2005), but particularly the Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) poet Haunani-Kay Trask in several lines, clearly evoking an Oceanic kinship or sisterhood across the Pacific. In her turn, Marsh mentored Grace Taylor, who acknowledges Marsh’s influence by absorbing the leitmotif of the “chameleon” into her own writing.

“[N]ot quite one/or the other” – Grace Teuila Taylor

Grace Teuila Taylor is of Samoan and English descent and finds pride and unity in her “intertwined” identity. She is a great advocate for spoken-word performances in Aotearoa New Zealand and the international arena. Her poetry published in her collection *Afakasi Speaks* navigates the struggles of “being afakasi”, including experiences of racism and discrimination.

Grace Taylor’s early spoken word performances predominantly address her afakasi identity. In her first major poem on the topic, “Intertwined: Being Afa Kasi”, Taylor (2008) uses terms that imply inner turmoil, back-and-forth thoughts, and fitting in with others: “struggling to find unity / within me” and “bouncing from one skin to the next / putting my culture on to fit in with the rest” exemplify this struggle (lines 11–14). Taylor voices her encounters with racism, often issuing from her own family: “RACISM / spoken from the mouths of my own blood / saying it as a joke? / saying it with love?” (lines 18–21). She warily questions the explanatory statements of her friends: “‘She’s afa kasi man, hamo hard’ / as if it were to excuse my lighter shade?” (lines 34–35). However, in her defensive stance and relentless proving to others of her *hamo* (Samoan) identity and brownness, she recognizes her own insincerity and admits: “Yes, racism / from family and friends, but my journey revealed / ‘damn Grace, it’s also from within’” (lines 62–64). She realizes that she herself has to come to terms with internalized racism, of wanting to be colour blind, and see past the colour of her own skin in comparison with others. In her concluding stanza she defines being afakasi and being herself as “a journey / a struggle / a celebration / a life” (lines 87–90). In her poem “My Sāmoa” (2011) where she describes her fading ties to Sāmoa concerning language, traditions and practices, and appearance, Taylor sees herself as “displaced / of a mixed race” (lines 55–56). As she questions her ties to Sāmoa, she determines that *her* Sāmoa is now in the Pacific diaspora of Aotearoa New Zealand. The “melting pot” of South Auckland where Taylor lives is thus her connection to her

Samoanness: “she is the way / to my Apia”,³ “the gateway / to my culture” (lines 68, 73–74, 77–78). Moreover, she now sees her Sāmoa passed on from her to her son. Reasoning that the benefits of being afakasi allow her to see two sides, to have room for learning and being able to navigate and negotiate within herself, Taylor explains that her identity “allows me to traverse / between the worlds of two / a transient nature / used as a blessing, not a curse” (lines 99–102). She refers to the Samoan *malaga* (journey) and concludes that her Sāmoa is in her heart, “a unique experience of many parts” (line 122).

The aforementioned mentorship Taylor received from Selina Tusitala Marsh is apparent in parallels between their work. Taylor dedicates her first poem, “Afastina” (2013), to “Selina” (Tusitala Marsh) and fellow Samoan poet “Tusiata” (Avia). In this poem she builds on themes of butterflies and their transformation or rebirth, parallel to the chrysalis leitmotif that Marsh introduces in her work. “Afastina” depicts the narrator’s evolution from shame and hiding to being able to “show and tell” and “share and tell” her knowledge of Samoan traditions such as the *siva* dance (2). Taylor plays on the term “monarchs”, moving from “Island Monarchs”, which she describes as “cultural monarchs”, to monarch butterflies, which appear to personify afakasi transformations in contrast with an image of traditional Samoan culture (2–3). The assertion that “Afakasi are modern monarchs / stretch your siva wide, cast your belongings” (3) subverts the hierarchical system of traditional Samoan society, with which Taylor as an afakasi is not entirely familiar. She counters the whispered “stories of missed belongings / white is my shame / for I am, Afakasi” by “claiming five senses for a sense of belonging / poetry to disguise the shame / speak Afakasi / let your words do the siva” (2). Taylor switches from the first-person perspective in the first two stanzas to second person in the third stanza and then to the third person: “She was known as a wanderer, before a butterfly monarch / black veins on wings atlas her belonging / casting aside her shame / she reclaimed this name Afakasi” (2). Thus, she disengages herself from the “awkward” first person, yet holds the power of naming herself by reclaiming the colonial term that attempted to erase her indigeneity by diluting it (Kincaid 2001, 122).⁴ Taylor’s poem “Polytricks of Afakasi” (2013, 5) further illustrates her unease and unfamiliarity with Samoan customs and languages. Although the opening lines state that “The Afakasi woman / knows her place”, she commits one faux pas after another: “the white Afakasi woman / tries too hard // The white Afakasi woman / sits next to / did she just?” and the reply “yes, that is what she does– / she sits next to the Head of State at the / fono” (5–6). The faux pas shows her awkwardness around understanding and fulfilling the social roles that Samoan hierarchies demand of her, making her and others around her aware that this Samoanness is not intrinsic to her. As the title suggests, the trickster is the afakasi, but whether this is intentional or the reading of her body and behaviour is unclear. The stanza that includes the lines “The white Afakasi woman / has mastered reading body language / she learns by watching” (6) suggests that the afakasi in fact has exceptional skills as she is working identity politics to her advantage. However, the lines “but it is political / poly is many / imaginary battles” (7) imply the politics and expectations exist only in her head suggesting that she is her own trickster. The poems “What is Afakasi? / Afakasi Is Dead” (2013, 20) and “Afakasi Has No Name” (2013, 32) reiterate the power of naming and representation that afakasi have for themselves. “What is Afakasi?” opens with a question, “You ask / What is Afakasi? / Afakasi is dead / they once said”, which allows

Taylor to kill off not the afakasi identity itself but the name “half-caste” and its outdated origins in racist, eugenicist thought (20). “Afakasi Has No Name” further questions the definition of afakasi as “half-caste” by introducing the diasporic hybridity of modern urban identities in flux, being “in-between” traditions (Bhabha 1996). The stanzas “Urbanista is Afakasi” and lines “a Kiwi anyways / born straight out of New Zealand” (Taylor 2013, 32) describe how urban diasporic life in Aotearoa New Zealand invalidates the option or the need to adhere to Samoan traditions. Further, Taylor juxtaposes experience in the diaspora with afakasi identity: “New Zealand born Sāmoan is Afakasi / who is actually a full-blooded Sāmoan / but these Afakasi experiences / speak more / than the full-blooded identity assigned” (33). In these lines she entirely subverts the understanding of afakasi as being “half-caste” as defined by blood quantum, and instead positions urban diasporic identities in a shifting role regarding cultural expectations. Taylor’s (2013, 26) poem “I am the Va” similarly invokes imagery of in-betweenness, moving from the term afakasi to that of the *vā* (space). As theorized by Samoan poet Albert Wendt (1999), *vā* is “space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together” (402). This is a visual poem in which Taylor uses white space to balance the relatedness between successive words and lines by alternately left- and right-justified lines:

I am the va	
	so cut me up
scatter me among yourselves	
	and taste the bitter sweetness
of the space between	
(2013, 26)	

Although “What is Afakasi?” claims that “Afakasi is part / dying and living” and “synthetic / realigned / into an unnatural state of being” (2013, 20–21), similar to the cruel “scattering” of “skin”, “decay” and “blood” in the *vā*, “I am the Va” opens space between its lines for navigation towards a sense of sharedness and wholeness.

“[T]here are no words for palangi but not white” – Karlo Mila

Karlo Mila is of Tongan, *palangi* (foreign/white) and Samoan descent and her poetry relates how writing empowered her and calmed her confusion about her identity, social role and relationship with her complex heritage. Mila’s poetry, published in her collections *Dream Fish Floating* (2005) and *A Well Written Body* (2008), presents the tensions of being a Tongan afakasi or hafekasi in the Aotearoa New Zealand diaspora. In *Dream Fish Floating* (Mila 2005) she addresses much of her writing to her family and ancestors and reflects on memories of her childhood emotions and interactions with Tongan relatives during her visits to the island. In her poem “Visiting Tonga” (Mila 2005, 21), she is called palangi though she denies being “white”. Being palangi or “wanting to be white” is “*fie palangi*”, which refers in this case to a cousin’s notions of freedom and wanting to marry for love. Mila herself passes no judgement until she begins to reflect on herself as a “Love child” (22); her subsequent account of the search for her absentee

father indicates how the familial context forms the basis of her personal exploration of identity (21–22).

A powerful and very intimate poem contemplating the role of Mila's palangi mother in her life is "Virgin Loi" (Mila 2005, 23), where *loi* is Tongan for lie. Mila questions her more liberal upbringing in regard to her virginity because other Tongan girls look down on her for "the freedom to choose", in this case sexual choices that refer to her relationships. The poem ends on a note of defiance, but also uncertainty and perhaps a sense of guilt:

so what, I say
I won't wear white on my wedding day
cream suits me better anyway
I say
laughing on the outside
but on the inside
my hymen is broken.(24)

"Virgin Loi" shows the influence of Christian belief on Tongan values, which Mila regrets having missed as other Tongans look down on her. This poem exemplifies the contrast between being raised by a palangi mother and a more traditionally Tongan upbringing. However, Mila also criticizes the unavoidable "coconut wireless" and the judgment and gossip that feed it.

A poem reflecting on particular moments in her life called "Eating Dark Chocolate and Watching Paul Holmes' Apology" (Mila 2005, 43) deals with the New Zealand radio broadcaster Paul Holmes, who referred to the then United Nations (UN) Secretary, General Kofi Annan, as a "cheeky darkie" on air. Watching his public apology provokes five memories for Mila at ages 6, 10, 15, 17 and 28, and she describes herself at different junctures in her life through references to chocolate: "I was a milk chocolate glass and a half", "caramello", "milky brown chocolatey sweet" (43). The shifting impressions of others, and her reactions to them, also form the poem's recollections. On the school playground at age six, she is thankful she is "pretty and fair / and had long hair", compared to another girl Tania, who was called the violent racial slurs of "blackie" and "golliwog" (43). At 15 she has an ambivalent crush on a blond boy, who calls her "darkie" to her face, but at 17, with another Rasta-haired boy, she then owns up to the term: "we were darkies anonymous then / making fun of ourselves before anyone else could" (44). Finally, at 28 she identifies as being an urban Aucklander, the city where the Pacific Islanders "outnumber prejudice in wide open spaces"; nonetheless, with her fair features she is "the cream of the crop / nesian queen" (44). After the Holmes apology she questions her own partner and fights with him about "freedom of speech", and out of apprehension for her future children she breaks the fourth wall of her poem as she proclaims: "i don't want my kids to have stanzas of darkie memories" (45). In this reflection between her adulthood and possible motherhood, Mila's memories of childhood return to her, and she touches on the role of her mixed parentage and the meaning of their skin colours and her own for her afakasi identity.

In *A Well Written Body*, Mila (2008) has become a mother to two sons and grown into her identities with this new role; nevertheless, there is still the underlying search for her origins now more directly expressed than in her previous work. In “Where are you from?” (Mila 2008, 12) she gives three differing answers: when asked by a Māori person who mistakes her for their own, when asked by a palangi who blushes at the answer, and when asked by a Tongan who increases her sense of ambiguity with another inquiry. This poem clearly portrays Mila’s positionality, which is the familiar shifting of identities when assessing an interrogator’s presumptions. However, the shifting rebounds with a Tongan lady, who in referring to the Tongan district of Mila’s father and the information that her mother is palangi, further asks “Are you Tongan?” Mila ponders, “I am not sure / if this is a question.” (12). Similarly, in “Five Poems on Not Being a Real Tongan” (13) Mila comically portrays three academics, a radio interviewer and a “Tongan cultural advisor” as they attempt to analyse her Tonganness. The interactions reflect a triangulation of concerns, such as her ability to speak Tongan, her alleged mispronunciation of “Donga / like, Doe a Deer a female deer”, and her not sounding like a Pacific Islander (13). The anthropologist suggests she suffers “from a New-Zealand born identity crisis”, while the advisor tells her to not heed any of this, saying that she is “the face of the future / language is only a skill set” and that Tonganness derives from genealogy (13).

Mila’s most contemplative poem on afakasi identity is “There Are No Words for Us” (2008, 14), where she dissects hybridity discourse with the recurring line “There is no language”. By emphasizing how outdated the terms “half-castes / half-breed mulatto / miscegenation” are, she illuminates the insufficiency of genetic nomenclature for capturing “the rupture and joy of gene-pool crossings” (14). The poem concludes on a high note, comparing the role of afakasi in “cultural exchange” with others as a present: “sweet nashi offerings / the original forbidden fruit // widening the palate of the world” (14).

Finally, in the poem “Fonu” (turtle) Mila describes searching for and returning to the “*fonua*”, the land, but feeling “foreign” once there because she does not know the proper way to use the terms “wrong” and “not quite right” (2008, 15). “Fonu” employs several geological metaphors, such as “upsetting the sediment”, “splitting bedrock” and “tracing fault lines”, to illustrate ties to the earth or land that are disjointed. She contemplates being “between the back slap / of two worlds” and reflects that finally there is no way to consolidate this except to “wear home / on your back” like a turtle does (15). Those with an alterable nature who can “crawl land / swim sea // amphibious genealogy”, “Fonu” argues, are ultimately more adaptable to both environments (15). In an interview with Maryanne Pale, Mila describes her afakasi identity as “a double-edged sword” (2012). With the negative of feelings of not always fitting in somewhere, the advantage is the embrace of several communities and multiple perspectives: “you are connected through blood and community to a diverse range of people and you learn multiple ways of being in the world” (2012). She cites her own poem and says: “‘There are no words for us, there is no language’ is probably my favourite resolution of this quandary ... we ‘widen the palate of the world’” (2012). Mila reflects on this malleability of multiple identities, stating that in a globalized world they are increasingly common, allowing one “to move between cultural spaces and places and connect meaningfully” (2012).

Amnesia in rootedness and routed-ness – Teresia K. Teaiwa⁵

In the preface to her poetry collection *Searching for Nei Nim’anoa*, Teresia K. Teaiwa (1995) explains her search for “emotional and intellectual roots” from a “a half-caste Pacific limbo” (ix). Teaiwa explores the displacements and replacements of her distinct mixed Pacific Islander (Banaban and I-Kiribati) and African American heritage, of “being black enuf” (47) and with having “mixed blood” (6). She follows the notion of Paul Gilroy that “to search for roots is to discover routes” (Teaiwa 1995, ix) by utilizing metaphors of navigation in the name of her collection. Nei Nim’anoa is a figure from I-Kiribati mythology, one of only a few female navigators in the male-dominated Oceanic traditions who symbolizes “rootedness and routed-ness” for Teaiwa (1995, ix).

Teaiwa’s poem “Mixed Blood” replies to questions asked of her about “HOW” she “resolves, solves, dissolves” and “negotiates, initiates, appreciates” her identity as someone of mixed ethnic heritage. She determinedly answers that “mixed blood” does all this; however, the argument remains inconclusive as the question is stubbornly returned: “How”? The poem “Amnesia I” (Teaiwa 2006a) belongs to a series of online poems titled “Amnesia” revolving around the wordplay of “amnesia” as memory loss versus the combination of “am”, the first-person present tense of “to be”, and *nesia*, the Greek word for island that pervades European delineations of Pacific regions and their peoples in Melanesia/n, Micronesia/n and Polynesia/n. This poem relies on visual peculiarities such as multiple replications of “Poly” and embolding the font of “black”, which depicts the visual meaning of Blackness as a political identity with an upper-case “B”, instead of in lower case as a colour. Teaiwa renounces any judgement about appearance and conduct with a defiant

Who cares whether you’re **Black**
small
or EXCESSIVE
I am Nesia
all of the above and more or less one
I land
on
all of the above and more or less one (lines 6–13)

she plays with the imagery of “landing” on all of the representations above, as her identities fall into multiple places at various moments in her lifetime.

Stylistically exceptional in Pasifika poetry, Teaiwa writes “on being black enuf” using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics to represent her African American heritage (1995, 47). She employs this vernacular to establish her “Blackness” towards those judging her via cultural stereotypes of “being black enuf” such as being able to dress, dance or rap. In response, Teaiwa repeatedly retorts:

i’d like to
beat you over the head
with
my blackness
but i won’t
because
that’s not what being black is about. (47)

She determines that mimicking the discriminatory behaviour shown towards her is not how she chooses to prove her identity, as Blackness is not a performance. In a sound recording with Samoan poet Sia Figiel, Teaiwa performs the poem “There Is No Poetry” (Teaiwa 2000), which addresses being afakasi without the archetypal understanding of the “part-European” heritage, stating “there is no poetry in part-European snobbery”. Furthermore, she asserts that “there is no privilege in being half-caste if you’re not part-European”, which is a clear admonishment to the common view and treatment of afakasi as being socially advantaged in a racist hierarchy that privileges whiteness as seen in Karlo Mila’s description of being “the cream of the crop” (Mila 2005, 44). Teaiwa’s (1995) poems in *Searching for Nei Nim’anoa* were written throughout various life stages, as a form of navigation and record of the routes between her multiple roots. Her rootedness on her father’s side is to Banaba, an island in Kiribati, whose population suffered violent displacement to the Fijian island of Rabi when the British mined the island for phosphate. Nonetheless, the diasporic Banaban culture gives no consideration to mixed blood:

In the culture of my father’s people, te I-Banaba, from the central Pacific Islands of Kiribati, there is no such thing as being part Banaban. You either are or you aren’t Banaban. Mixed blood does not lessen one’s claim to being Banaban or one’s authority as Banaban. (Teaiwa 2014, 44)

When considered in relation to her mother’s diasporic claim to Africa through her African American lineage and the “one-drop rule” of the US racialization of blackness, Teaiwa’s term “amnesia” prevails over any expressions of “hybridity” or “half-caste”. For this reason, it is problematic to refer to her poetry and identity as “hybrid” under this umbrella analysis of afakasi; however, this example further underlines the inappropriateness of racializing terms of blood quantum and half-ness versus wholeness. Teaiwa’s imagery of a navigator more appropriately represents the essence of Pasifika identities in an ocean of connected islands. In Banaba as well as in other places in the Pacific identity is tied to the land: “In our knowledge system, land is equivalent to blood” (44); as such a hybrid identity is situated not in a person’s blood but in the lands of her ancestors.

Storytelling and the essence and soul of words

Listening to Marsh’s (2009b) poem “Fast Talking PI” was an entirely altered experience to reading it in her poetry collection (Marsh 2009a, 58) to which it gives the title. The poem reads as an extensive eight-page list, but the audio version highlights Marsh’s voice, intonation, and personal nuances and mixes in syncretic music. The audio has rhythm, and the poem is transformed into a fast-paced rap backed by a modern synthetic dubstep beat, periodically infused with “island-style” string band, sticks and drum instrumentals.

In an interview with fellow Pasifika poet Maryanne Pale, Grace Taylor (2012) talks about the conversion of her poetry into spoken-word performances: “I think of spoken word poetry as breathing life into your words. Every time you share/perform your poetry it evolves, I love watching my poetry grow and transform.” In a similar manner, Selina Tusitala Marsh (2010) describes her own performance of “Fast Talking PI”:

“Within the space of a breath, the audience is presented with the connection between speaking and moving, between self-representation and active, physical engagement with the world” (204). This illustrates how spoken-word performances bring the written word and personal stories to life in ways that reading them does not, by adding an enhanced audio-sensory experience to the lyrics. Marsh describes the spoken word as a significant form of self-expression that assists in this identity journey as it is the essence of storytelling:

I feel that a lot of my poetry is accessible by the masses – especially when I perform it [...]. certainly I’m a performance poet who brings energy and drama and intrigue into my delivery. So it’s not just reading words off the page in a monotone voice, it’s embodying the words. And that, as we know, stems from thousands of years of oral tradition and a continuous vibrant oral culture today. (Marsh 2017).

The “fast talking” PI is also present in Grace Taylor’s performances, and her view on the significance of spoken word for Pacific orality is that the spoken word provides a more “instant message” for the younger generation as the “world is getting faster” (personal communication, 2013). Furthermore, her performances have provided space to connect with younger Pasifika in Auckland as she combines youth work with her poetry: “I have seen spoken word poetry reconnect our younger generations of Pacific people with their pasts. I think it is a way forward – it is US using OUR voice, unfiltered, loud and clear” (personal communication, 2013). The spoken word invites a space for collaboration, not only between Taylor and the *Rising Voices* youth she invites to express themselves, but also between established poets, as in the poetry recording by Teaiwa and Figiel. Teaiwa’s (2006b) experimental sound recording *I Can See Fiji*, in collaboration with Māori poet Hinemoana Baker, is another version of Pasifika storytelling.⁶ The multimedia “talk-story” Teaiwa performs is shared not only between the collaborators, but also with a circle of listeners, where the role of listening is as commanding as that of speaking.

Connecting “our sea of islands”⁷

I selected the four writers here because they write widely in English on the theme of cultural identities; however, they are a small sample of a greater expanse of Pasifika literature. In particular, there is a great deal of writing by francophone Pacific writers, but there remains a definite divide between anglophone and francophone writers, academics, publishers and audiences. In a humorous illustration of this disparity, Teaiwa published the English-language prosaic poem “The Ocean is Wide: 10 Sound Bytes on Francophonie from an Anglophone Perspective” in the French Polynesian publication *Littéràma’ohi* (Teaiwa 2006c), describing the situation at a conference in Nouméa when academics in both languages presented papers without translations:

When it was the french-speaking academics turn to speak, most of the english-speakers’ eyes glazed over. Some of them took quiet naps. While english-speaking academics held the floor, a couple of the french-speaking academics unabashedly read the newspaper and tourist brochures. The ocean is wide. (143)

Jean Anderson (2010), the English translator of francophone poet Spitz’s *Island of Shattered Dreams*, argues that since English is currently the literary world market’s

lingua franca, French Pacific writers are more likely to be aware of their English-language contemporaries than vice versa (288), which contributes to the prevailing inattention. In 2006, only afakasi French Polynesian writer Chantal T. Spitz's *L'Île des rêves écrasés* ([1991] 2007), later translated into English as *Island of Shattered Dreams* (2007) and the anthology of Tahitian writing *Vārua Tupu* (2006) edited by Frank Stewart, Kareva Mateata-Allain, and Alexander Dale Mawyer, "crossed the border" between French and English Pacific writing (Anderson 2010, 288). Exchanges such as take place in these publications, reconnect these regions, enabling ideas and literature to transcend artificial and colonially imposed boundaries, especially considering French Pacific literature cannot be called *postcolonial* as French territories in the Pacific are still under colonial control.

Spitz's ([1991] 2007) novel *Island of Shattered Dreams*, which is interspersed with poetry about the anti-nuclear and independence movements, focuses on a Mā'ohi (indigenous French Polynesian) French family and "half-caste", or *demi* themes. Spitz has been confronted with questions about her lack of racial purity and "bourgeois upbringing", which she manifests in the *demi* protagonist of her novel, Emere (Gonschor 2005, 86). Emere's mixed heritage is common among Tahitians, and thus their Mā'ohi consciousness, creating what Spitz describes as "identity crises: a situation that is obvious if one carries in one's veins the blood of one's oppressors besides that of one's own people" (Gonschor 2005, 86). Through interviews with Spitz, Lorenz Gonschor (2005) argues against Robert Nicole's criticism that Spitz is "obsessed with race instead of focusing on colonial injustice" by emphasizing her identification "as Mā'ohi and nothing hybrid at all" (87). By defending the inclusiveness of the term "Mā'ohi" "for all people of Mā'ohi ancestry regardless of their racial purity", Spitz privileges genealogical descent and indigenous ways of belonging over racist markers, maintaining a directly anti-colonial stance.

Teaiwa's and Spitz's indigenous Pasifika identities in their writing reveal the cultural specificities of their respective heritages which do not include the colonizing power of the Pacific nation they are from. As Spitz argues in anti-colonial terms against notions of indigenous purity and blood quantum, her Mā'ohi lineage means she is wholly indigenous and not hybrid. Nonetheless, Spitz's European heritage is English, not French, the colonial power still operative in French Polynesia. While Teaiwa (2014) makes a similar statement to Spitz, that Banaban identity is based on direct lineage and not measurable in fractions of purity (44), as an African American woman, Teaiwa cannot set aside that aspect of her identity as easily, nor does she want to as she respects the history of African American liberation struggles in the USA.

Whilst the Pasifika poets discussed here are connected by the themes of identity they address in their work, they also share social similarities, as women, mothers and academics. Teresia K. Teaiwa's (1995, 49) "In a Room of Academics" contemplates the divide between embodying the role of an indigenous person and that of an academic. More specifically, the poem explains that the "colonized mind" of the indigenous academic leads to "fearing yourself as an academic" and ultimately "hating yourself as an academic" (49). In these lines Teaiwa shows apprehension in reconciling two such opposing viewpoints. Gina Wisker (2005) describes Teaiwa's approach as "tackl[ing] the issue of representation of Pacific women from *within* the frames and discourses of a colonizer", signifying the epistemological borders Teaiwa crosses in

embracing both viewpoints (439; emphasis added). On the one hand, Teaiwa holds the perspective of a western Enlightenment academic, and on the other, that of a Pasifika woman who draws her knowledge from her ancestors; however, she integrates them both in her personhood as a decolonized female academic.⁸ Likewise, Karlo Mila's (2008) poem "Mother-of-pearl" (30) shines light on the contemporary roles of women negotiating differing expectations in the Pasifika diaspora. The "black-pearl girls in business suits" push boundaries, while building bridges with their traditions by dancing the *ta'olunga* and *siva* (30).

Selina Tusitala Marsh's (2009b) "Fast Talking PI" (58) refers to the modern urban "mocha-drinkin', horn-rimmed glasses, real TV PI" and the "published in a peer reviewed journal PI", as two manifestations of contemporary Pasifika women (58, 60). Grace Taylor's comments in an interview with me signify a groundedness in her *afakasi* identity that has evolved through her being and her work: "Motherhood has not so much grounded me in my identity but rather by my need to be the best I can be" (personal communication, 2013). She reveals that this is what moves her to be "true to my identity, while remembering that [it] changes and evolves" (personal communication, 2013). The topic of *afakasi* informs her poetry continuously as her son is "of more mixedness than [she, which] also heightens [her] responsibility", leading her to "delve [more] into this topic in [her] poetry – for [her]self and for him" (personal communication, 2013). In merging her social roles, Taylor does not portion herself into fractions, but multiplies into parallel fulltime roles:

[T]he only conflict I find as a Pacific female poet and academic is [...] about contemporary and traditional expectations of what that should look like and function like. In particular being a fulltime mum, fulltime student, fulltime poet – me taking on that more obvious leadership role can be challenging to generations before me. (Personal communication, 2013)

While Taylor speaks of generations before her, the ancestors Teaiwa and the other writers also invoke for guidance play a significant role in their scholarship. Most prominently, Marsh's Samoan middle name "Tusitala" given to her by her grandfather means storyteller or "teller of tales", a role she has proudly taken on for its richness in Pacific literature (2017).

A navigation of in-betweenness to wholeness

With the metaphor of navigation and the Oceanic space of the *vā* in mind, identity can be read as a journey rather than a fixed departure point or destination. As the Pacific poets here describe, they traverse this wide ocean to find their roots in ancestral lands, first tentatively then more confidently, finally embracing all the parts of themselves, including the struggles and the pain these may bring. While Selina Tusitala Marsh and Karlo Mila have various Pasifika identities mixed with a white heritage, Taylor's phenotypically light skin and hair obscure her Samoan heritage almost entirely, leading to her having to prove her Samoan heritage. Similarly, Teresia K. Teaiwa's African American heritage was called into question during her time as a PhD student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, yet her Pacific home is in Honolulu, an American city. However, Teaiwa is not from Honolulu and claims multiple diasporic identities

stemming from her Banaban heritage, which is rooted in a displaced population, dislocated from indigenous lands in Kiribati to Fiji. The (hi)stories of the peoples of the Pacific have been passed down orally over generations, and now these diasporic poets embody their in-between role by bringing together writing and storytelling to tell their own contemporary stories, in ways that empower themselves in this fast-moving and ever-progressing world.

In memoriam: Teresia K. Teaiwa (1968–2017)

Following Teresia K. Teaiwa's wise advice to map the route of one's scholarship, my conclusion aims to amplify the effects the scholarship and creativity of indigenous women such as herself, and the writers whose work I have returned to here, have in the world. It is their voices that should be heard initially, and so I have chosen my Pacific studies "ancestors" deliberately, and the Marxes and Gramscis will be purely filtered through her lens and words (Teaiwa 2014).

Notes

1. "Colloquially, migrants from elsewhere in the Pacific are often known by a local umbrella term: *Pasifika* (a transliteration of Pacific also spelled 'Pasifica,' 'Pacifika,' and 'Pasefika') (Te Punga Somerville 2012, xxi–xxii).
2. Marsh was commissioned by the Commonwealth Education Foundation to perform at Westminster Abbey on March 14, 2016 at the 53rd Commonwealth Day Observance.
3. The capital city of independent Samoa.
4. "This naming of things is so crucial to possession [...] that it is a murder, an erasing, and it is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to it (conquest), among their first acts of liberation is to change their names" (Kincaid 2001, 122).
5. This article was originally written in 2012. Following Teaiwa's sudden passing in 2017, I write about the impact of her writing on Pasifika students in the diaspora and her visionary role in Pacific studies, but keep direct quotes in the present tense as I initially wrote them. Poet Sina Va'ai (2005) sees the contemporary Pacific writer's role as "like a sign post, pointing the way beyond, to a future (whether personal, national, regional, global) which is imaginatively shaped and sketched" (8) and Teaiwa's scholarship has now taken this role.
6. Hinemoana Baker describes this as "I think of the result, 'I can see fiji', as a docu-story, a poem-entary, even as an old-fashioned radio drama. Basically it's a story – to some extent Teresia's story – told with words and sound" (Teaiwa 2006b).
7. "Our Sea of Islands" (Eveli Hau'ofa 2008, 27–40) portrays the significance of reconnecting the islands and people of Oceania across the colonial borders that divided them.
8. Teaiwa's (2014) essay, "The Ancestors We Choose", questions the intellectual genealogy of white male scholars in Pacific studies who interrogate Pacific researchers' motives to strive for authenticity.

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Notes on contributor

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